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ABSTRACT

Senior, high quality teachers can be retained in inner city schools despite limited resources and difficult conditions. Compared to teachers in suburban and rural school districts, teachers in urban systems often have lower salaries, work under greater bureaucratic constraints, teach more students per day, and lack basic materials. Good, supportive working conditions can significantly mitigate such drawbacks. The following measures can serve to create an attractive working environment for urban school teachers: (1) improving the management of existing resources and involving teachers in decisions made at the school level; (2) working for smaller class sizes, which benefits students as well as teachers; (3) rewarding good teaching with opportunities and incentives to remain in the classroom (such as master teacher recognition within the school that allows experienced teachers power, prestige, and money while students and new teachers can continue to benefit from the master teachers' expertise); (4) minimizing bureaucracy and empowering teachers through greater knowledge about their field, their professional community, and educational policy; (5) breaking down teacher isolation through team teaching and joint planning; and (6) helping teachers to try out new teaching methods and generate new ideas for a sense of continual professional learning. Since the effectiveness of urban schools is largely dependent upon quality teachers, efforts to retain them should be a high priority. Included are nine references. (JB)

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RETAINING GOOD TEACHERS IN URBAN SCHOOLS

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RETAINING GOOD TEACHERS IN URBAN SCHOOLS

Research makes clear that student learning is affected by teachers' qualifications and experience (Webster, 1988). Yet, the very schools where students most need excellent teachers often have the greatest difficulty hiring and retaining the best. This is because these schools that serve poor and minority children — often urban schools — have such limited funds for teacher salaries, educational materials, and general maintenance of the educational environment.

Central city schools suffer from far greater teacher shortages than do suburban or rural districts (Council of Great City Schools, 1987). Urban schools also tend to have higher teacher absenteeism, higher teacher turnover, and a higher percentage of substitute teachers compared to other schools (Bruno & Negrete, 1983). Moreover, these schools must function with more new and uncertified teachers (Darling-Hammond, 1988). In fact, the single greatest source of educational inequality is in the disproportionate exposure of poor and minority students — those students who fill inner-city schools — to less trained and experienced teachers (Darling-Hammond, 1988).

Retaining Good Teachers

Besides common salary differentials between urban teachers and teachers in surrounding suburban areas, urban teachers work under greater bureaucratic constraints than do suburban or rural teachers; they tend to teach more students a day; and they do so while lacking basic materials such as books, desks, blackboards, and paper (Council, 1987). At the same time, their students often bring into the classroom the social problems that plague their inner-city communities.

Nevertheless, good working conditions — even more than students' socioeconomic status—are associated with better teacher attendance, more effort, higher morale, and a greater sense of efficacy in the classroom. These conditions include (Corcoran, Walker, & White, 1988):

- strong, supportive principal leadership;
- good physical working conditions;
- high levels of staff collegiality;
- high levels of teacher influence on school decisions; and
- high levels of teacher control over curriculum and instruction.

The problem for urban administrators, then, is to create supportive working conditions, even when they have few resources.

Improve the Management of Existing Resources

Over time, lack of resources — whether staff, material, equipment or funds — creates stress among school staff (Corcoran et al., 1988).

Money spent on attractive, well-stocked classrooms; private and accessible telephones; and good copying machines may be a wise investment when compared with the cost of continually replacing disgruntled teachers (Darling-Hammond, 1988). Moreover, it is important to involve teachers in decisions that can be made at the school level. When teachers help make decisions about such resources as books, paper, and other classroom supplies, they can use their own expertise to improve the professional culture of the school (Corcoran et al., 1988).

Work for Smallness of Scale

Students learn better in small classes and minischools, and black students are helped even more by small classes than are whites (Word, 1991). Teachers also feel more effective and have a greater sense of community in these smaller environments, and burnout is less likely when classes are small (Bruno & Negrete, 1983).

Reward Good Teaching with Opportunities to Remain in the Classroom and School

Seniority rules, especially in inner-city schools, tend to create high teacher mobility as experienced teachers leave their classrooms for better assignments (teaching middle-class students) or for

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promotions to administrative positions. These seniority rules also psychologically remove those about to be transferred out, while leaving the remaining inexperienced teachers feeling especially vulnerable and stressed (Farber, 1991).

"Combat pay," an incentive program that offers a salary differential to teachers willing to serve in difficult school sites, is apparently not the answer. Such an incentive is used largely by teachers at the low end of the salary scale, and so does not lead to the stability of senior teachers (Bruno & Negrete, 1983).

However, career ladders that afford creative and experienced teachers the power, prestige, and money they deserve *as master teachers, within the school* where they have made their reputation, enable both students and neophyte teachers to benefit from their expertise. At the same time, master teachers can work with new teachers in teaching teams and in other ways, breaking down the isolation of the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 1988).

Minimize Bureaucracy and Empower Teachers

While less able teachers can feel protected by the structure of large, impersonal, urban schools, good teachers often leave these schools because bureaucratic constraints blunt their individual authority (Haberman, 1987).

However, unless teachers are given the training and support to manage their new responsibilities, the empowering possibilities of decision making will not be realized. On the other hand, it has also been argued that teachers' sense of empowerment may be increased more by greater knowledge about their field, their professional community, and educational policy than by controlling school management details (Lichtenstein, McLaughlin, & Knudsen, 1991).

Break Down Teachers' Isolation

Team teaching and joint planning can be instituted in schools without the addition of major resources or restructuring. These strategies offer the opportunity for enhancing teachers' sense of effectiveness (Corcoran et al., 1988). Teacher and parent-teacher councils can also give teachers new arenas of authority, while breaking down the isolation of the classroom and creating new partners in schooling.

Help Teachers Function as Continuous Learners

A common reason why urban teachers fail as teachers and drop out is that they themselves do not function as continuous learners. Instead of changing their approach when it seems ineffective, teachers often continue with the same teaching methods until they are as demoralized as their students (Haberman, 1987).

Teachers need both administrative support for trying out new teaching methods and real help in generating new ideas for work in the classroom.

Conclusion

Despite administrative and financial constraints in many urban schools, a variety of innovations can be used to provide inner-city students with creative and experienced teachers. Since the effectiveness of urban schools is largely dependent upon such teachers, effort to retain them should be a high priority.

— Carol Ascher

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